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ABSTRACT

This description of the development of imagination and fantasy in children outlines how children view their fantasies, imaginings, imaginary companions, and lies at different stages of development. Main topics include (1) the purposes of fantasy; (2) fantasy in preschool children; (3) imaginative games and dramas; (4) promotion or inhibition of fantasy; (5) middle childhood; (6) lies; and (7) imaginary companions. Subsections on fantasy in preschool children concern the use of fantasy for wish fulfillment and for coping with bodily functions, discipline and jealousy. Other subsections cover fantasies in narratives; preferred fantasies in children's literature; and children's difficulty in distinguishing between fantasy and reality. Imaginative games and dramas are discussed in terms of the influence of reality on them; their value as a means of coping and improving social acceptance; individual differences; and standard plots, rules, and roles. The discussion of promotion or inhibition of fantasy includes sections about parents; props and playmates; excessive structure; the role of television; and training for the use of imagination and fantasy. The material on middle childhood explores the waning of imagination and fantasy. Subsections on children's lies emphasize the importance of distinguishing between lies, wish fulfillment, and fantasies, and discuss children's beliefs about lying. Characteristics and functions of imaginary companions are described. (RH)

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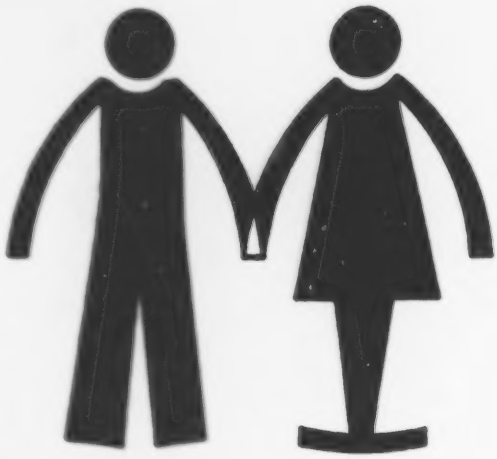

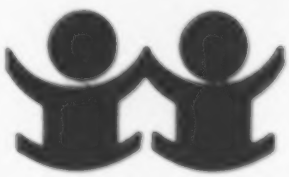

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by Shelley Phillips

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FANTASY, LIES AND IMAGINARY COMPANIONS

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FANTASY: Its Purpose

Is fantasy important for children? If so, what is its function? While the general consensus is that it is very important, different schools of thought have varying interpretations of the role and function of fantasy in children. The psychoanalytic school sees it as a safe release of neurotic energy. Long ago, within this framework, Melanie Klein emphasised that a rich fantasy life is an essential part of healthy development in children (1932). She saw a limited opportunity for fantasy and imagination in early life, as an important factor in neuroticism. When children are depressed or guilty, their fantasy life diminishes, and some acute disturbances (for example a severe loss) may reduce the fantasy work of the child (Kurdek & Siesky, 1980).

It is suggested, by some professionals, that encouraging children to utilise fantasy can be helpful in healing disturbances of the mind or body. For example, Pulaski (1974) has used it to calm hyperactive children and to increase their attention span. Apparently children, with the ability to imagine activity in their own minds, seem to have less need to act it out.

It also seems that the ability to fantasise can help children cope with feelings of aggression . In line with this, Singer and Singer (1979) found that boys, who are low in imaginative ability, tend to be more physically aggressive than children who engage in a rich fantasy life.

The ability to fantasise can also help children practise feelings of fear from a basis of safety. Racing, chasing, attacking, capturing and rescuing are common themes in play, whereby children experience excitement and tension. As they play hide and seek, children may experience and practise with manageable amounts of terror, while waiting to be pounced upon. Such games provide quick reversal of tension within a limited and structured period (Scheil & Hall, 1983).

These interpretations are widely accepted by most schools of thought. However folowers of the psychoanalytic school also argue that children have fantasies which parallel adult sexuality. The more extreme interpret children's fantasies as having similar sexual content and aims to adult fantasies. Opponents argue that this interpretation reflects the tendency of adults to project their own thoughts into the minds of children without giving sufficient weight to the child's perspective (Phillips 1986).

For example the play of a three year old girl with her father may

be described as 'obvious flirtation' by psychoanalytically trained practitioners. Yet the child's behaviour and language may be an imitation of the mother's or a mirror of the father's behaviour and adult sexual content have little part in it. Such behaviours in children need to be well researched, examined objectively and studied from the child's perspective and psychoanalytic clinicians are criticised for their lack of proper control of variables and objectivity in their conclusions about children.

Similarly the theory that young female children have fears and fantasies of sexual penetration may be seen as unnecessarily convoluted when there are simpler explanations. Hence those who research self concept development relate fears of swords, for example, to the fact that the body is totally central to the self concept of preschoolers and they most naturally have anxieties about damage to it (Phillips, 1983). Similarly whether young children learn from and understand the sexual symbolism of fairy tales, as Bettelheim (1976) suggests, is much debated. Discussion of whether or not children have sexual fantasies which parallel those of adults warrants a paper on its own and will not be pursued further here.

The psychoanalytic school have also advanced theories of children's anxieties relating to eating or being eaten when children are at the 'oral stage' of development. Certainly there is evidence which is discussed in the next section that children's fantasies relate to pleasures and anxieties about bodily functions.

Many of the neo psychoanalysts have advanced theories that are more popular than those of the psychoanalytic extremists. For example Bowlby has addressed fantasies that relate to attachment and separation anxieties. Peller (1966) describes fantasies which allay young children's anxieties about their vulnerability and their fear of lack of protection. There is also a wealth of evidence that young children, perhaps at the stage of being the littlest and the youngest in the family, enjoy fantasies of becoming one who ultimately defeats the largest and the strongest. These fantasies are discussed in a later section.

In summary, the most widely accepted theories of the psychoanalytic school and its descendants are those which see children as needing to fantasise in order to work through their anxieties about vulnerability or separation and their stressful feelings of guilt, anger, or self aggrandisement.

Others, such as Sutton-Smith (1967), regard fantasy as just plain fun, and a means of making relaxing nonsense out of ordinary expectations. Certainly children love to re-organise familiar material for the purpose of novelty and humour. For example, they like to eat bread into unusual shapes, or to blow bubbles in a glass of milk with a straw. Sutton-Smith sees fantasy play as divergent thinking, which reflects some of the free ranging speculation, the tentativeness and alternatives that are part of the child's view of things. Imagination and fantasy of this kind probably increases the child's ability to form new and rich associations, and helps the growth of intelligence.

Piagetians synthesise these two approaches and, while recognising the contribution fantasy makes to the emotional life of children,

also see fantasy as part of the normal push for intelligence and learning. The following description of the development of imagination and fantasy in children draws largely upon this eclectic approach. Above all it outlines how children themselves see their fantasies, imaginings, imaginary companions and their lies at different stages of their development.

FANTASY IN PRE-SCHOOLERS

Just as pre-school children invent their own type of logic in their attempt to make sense of the world (See Selected Paper, No 30, Phillips, 1983), so their fantasies are evoked by them for temporary interest, immediate self satisfaction or as an expression of their feelings (Piaget, 1972).

Piaget believes that although children can make the distinction between their own pretences in play and reality very early, they believe in their own pretences spontaneously without effort. Unlike the make believe of drama or poetry or play in adults or primary school children, the 2-4 year old does not consider whether his or her fantasies are real or not. Children of this age are aware in a sense that they are not real for others, and make no serious attempt to persuade the adult that they are. For the child it is a question which does not arise, because fantasy and imaginative play is a direct satisfaction of his or her own wishes and has its own kind of belief. It is the child's own subjective reality (Piaget, 1972).

Wishfulfilling Fantasies

Nevertheless while they are able to make the distinction, some elements of their fantasy play are probably not understood by young children, and have much to do with their unconscious feelings, emotions or anxieties. For example, a child, who has been made jealous by the birth of a younger brother and happens to be playing with two dolls of unequal size, may make the smaller one go away on a journey, while the bigger one stays with its mother. The child may be unaware that he or she is thinking of himself or herself and a younger brother (Piaget, 1972).

There are probably intermediate stages between fantasy and conscious make-believe. A child who reproduces an action, for example a parent who accidentally hits her, and reverses it and say : 'Naughty Mummy', often knows what she is doing. But when a child has been frightened by a dog or a train, and invents games with toy dogs and trains which do not frighten her dolls, it is quite possible that the child has no recollection of the real event. However there are probably not water-tight divisions between fantasy and conscious make believe play, just as one cannot always distinguish conscious and unconscious elements in human behaviour. In adults, so called rational thought has its rational and irrational elements. Adults have simply had more time than preschoolers to learn the social rules of camouflage.

Coping With Bodily Functions, Discipline and Jealousy

Early fantasies in young children are often a blending of the emotions of the child in response to the social coercions of family life. They centre around bodily functions, family relationships and, if the opportunity presents itself, the

arrival of a new baby. For example many toddler fantasies relate to elimination processes, and a doll may be chastised for dirtying himself or instructed to 'sit one the pot,' or to 'ask for the pot.' Western society and its child rearing practices reveal concern about control of bodily functions, and the young child's fantasies are a way of coping with these pressures, and learning how to repond to social demands.

In puzzling the mechanics of human elimination, one 5 year old invented an imaginary character who urinated through his navel and said, 'Why do boys need a long thing like that. They could do it through their navel'. A 3 year old, looking at two male statues comments, 'Its a good thing they've got two things for water to come out; if they hadn't they'd quarrel (Piaget, 1972).

In respect of family relationships, the young child's fantasies often deal with punishment and coercion. For example, a child of 5, temporarily on bad terms with her father, who has chastised her, fantasises that her doll, Nancy, will avenge her, and says, 'Nancy cut off her Daddy's head. She's stuck it on again with some play dough. Its not very good'.

Fantasies dealing with the recent birth of a sibling may be wishful or protective. A child of 3, with a new baby brother, arguing with another child says, 'Don't do that. I have a baby inside and it makes him cry. When he's born he'll knock you down.'.

On such occasions, fantasy is often used as a socially acceptable outlet for socially unacceptable behaviours. For example, young children may be jealous of the new baby. This is compounded by the fact that the baby is allowed to make messes or refuse food and other things they are not. The height of this jealousy and resentment is not necessarily at birth, but when the infant is beginning to run about, is very messy and requires the mother's constant attention. The preschooler would be severely punished if he or she were to physically act out this jealousy. However such punishment is unlikely if a doll is substituted.

For example, Jenny is 4 1/2, with a 15 month old brother. She arrived at her pre-school and found a baby doll. She sat it in a chair and said, 'It's brekkie time', and began feeding it with a toy spoon from a toy basin. She then threw the basin and toy spoon away and said. 'Jimmy you can't have any more. You threw it all on the floor'. Later when the teacher handed out the morning juice and carrots, Jenny said, ' We won't give Jimmy any will we. He didn't eat his brekkie.'

Distinguishing Fantasy and Reality:
Dreams, Tricks, Household Mechanics and Magic

Young preschool children at the pr-operational stage of thinking, which is described in Selected Paper, No 30 (Phillips, 1983), believe that the events of their dreams take place in their room, not in their head, and that they are still there when they awaken. Thus a child waking up from a nightmare may insist there is a lion or a nuclear bomb under the bed. As the logic of pre-schoolers is quite different, it is not much use applying adult logic to pacify these children, or to tell them they are silly. For the child the lion was, and still is, in the room. Nor is this the time to explain that lions are confined to zoos

or the wild, or that nuclear bombs are kept in arsenals in other countries. This is better done when the child is curious about such things, perhaps while watching TV or reading a book.

Most effective is when parents can understand their child's logic and enter into the spirit of it. For example, they may turn on the light, look under the bed and say that the lion has decided to go back to the zoo, and invite the child to look also and perhaps discuss why the lion decided to leave.. With such exercises, and the development of the concept of conservation (Phillips, 1983) in other areas, in a year or two, preschoolers come to understand that dreams are internal.

Preschoolers seem to have the greatest difficulty in distinguishing between reality and fantasy where the fantasy is not of their own invention. For example, preschoolers may be frightened when Dad dresses up as Santa Claus or pretends to be a hippopotamus. It is also why they are troubled by seeing a physically impaired person, for example, without a limb or an eye. 'Is this going to happen to me' is a matter of anxiety and a possibility, because they can fantasise it. Selected Paper, No 29 (Phillips, 1983), discusses the physical nature of the self concept of the preschooler, and why such fantasies are so threatening.

In addition everyday objects that make things disappear, the toilet bowl, vacuum cleaner and the bath tub drain, seem threatening to many small children, because they fantasise that these devices might make them disappear too.

A further example of the unclear division between fantasy and reality in preschoolers is their belief that they can magically influence events beyond their control, by an application of will, just as they see adults 'make' the car go. A small girl who wanted to be a boy said to her father, 'I shall go back inside you and when I come out I'll be a baby and I'll be called Derrick.'

Professional magicians are said to find preschool children an unresponsive audience. This seems to be, because in the child's own magical scheme of possibilities, there is nothing more remarkable in sawing a woman in half and reuniting her, than in any other unanalysed wonder of everyday life (Stone and Church,1984).

For this reason one cannot be sure whether preschoolers see the fantasy and the joke in pretend games. They may take them seriously and become upset.

Young children also accept the possibility of magical metamorphosis. One child asked, 'Daddy when you were little, were you a boy or a girl'? Another told her grandmother that little girls grew into mummies and then grew into daddies.

Another child trying to feed cabbages to chickens and having been told that chickens do not eat cabbages explained, 'I'm giving it to them so that they can save it for after they become rabbits' (Stone & Church, 1979, p360).

Preschoolers Fantasies in Their Narrative Stories

Young children show an increasing ability to invent a story which parallels the development of their understanding of the processes of conservation, reversibility and associativity (see Selected Paper, No 30, Phillips, 1983) as follows:

Children under 2 years invent stories which are predominantly a matter of free association. Their stories are fragmented and do not have a consistent theme, sequence or characters. They may use full sentences, but they are not closely linked together (Fein 1978).

After 2 years the same character remains in the story from beginning to end (conservation) but there is only one main actor, and the main interest is in unintegrated specifics.

After 3 years of age the characters in children's stories are not only conserved but co-ordinated with others. There are subordinate characters who interact with a central figure, who is mentioned several times. Later, perhaps around 4 years, more complicated interaction among characters appears.

After 5 years of age, conservation of plot is apparent, and as a consequence there is a beginning, a middle and an end. Such a structure also involves the operation of reversibility which the child is attaining at this age (Phillips, 1983). Thus the first scene usually starts in a place of equilibrium, perhaps home, then there is a change, perhaps to excitement or danger. Finally the narrative returns to the beginning situation and its equilibrium (Fein,1978).

Said one 5 year old,' Do you know about the bird that lives in my swing tree. I'll tell you. He lives in a nest and its very high up. He and the mummy didn't have enough for the baby birds to eat, so he caught an aeroplane to the supermarket. The plane was too big to go in the car park so he had to drop out of the sky with his wings. He flew into the supermarket and got some frozen peas and some chocolate biscuits in his beak. He didn't pay so the policeman got out his helicopter and chased him; a lady gave him the money. Then he flew back home and the baby birds had something to eat and stopped going cheep, cheep -that's the way they talk.. Then they all went to bed and that's the end'.

It is not until 8 or 9 years that children can add subplots to the main theme and conserve parallel stories, and organise the whole story into discrete chapters (Fein, 1978).

Some Preferred Fantasies in Children's Literature

The kind of literature that is enjoyed by children at different developmental ages, because it gives expression to their favourite fantasies, is discussed in Selected Paper, 35 (Maron, 1984). A few additional preferences are discussed by Peller (1966). For example in toddlerhood when children are very dependent on the presence of the mother, they are interested in stories such as Peter Rabbit whose mother goes shopping. While she is away Peter is nearly eaten by a wolf. This story gives expression to fantasies related to the child's anxiety and anger about separation from the mother.

A little later in preschool years, children find satisfaction in fantasies where the littlest and the youngest in the family ultimately gets the better of those who are bigger and stronger, as in the stories of Tom Thumb and Jack and the Beanstalk. Older children enjoy stories about heroes and heroines at a time when such identifications are important to self concept developoment. The reading of biographies about their favourite idols enables adolescents to enjoy fantasies that they share in the lives of those whom they aspire to emulate, and fantasies that they have access to their private lives makes them feel important. Young adolescent girls, lacking the powerful identity figures in the media available to boys, often develop a passion for stories of the goddesses of pre-patriarchal societies or societies where vestiges of stories of powerful females remain, as in ancient Greece (Phillips, in press). Such stories satisfy healthy fantasies at a time of crucial identity development.

IMAGINATIVE GAMES AND DRAMAS

As children grow older, fantasy gives way to imaginative games with rules and these become more elaborate and are followed more and more closely. Taking turns, adopting and reversing roles, and delineating beginnings and endings, success and failure, are the techniques utilised to preserve the social agreement that constitutes this kind of play. Make believe is halfway between the unfettered fantasy of the preschool years, and the more reality oriented imagination of late primary school.

Of course, imaginative games first appear in rudimentary form in infancy in peek a boo and waving bye bye games. These blossom in the form of dramatic play between 3 & 4, and reach their height between the ages of 5 and 6 (Fein, 1978). These dramas gradually become more and more complex and ingenious, with imaginative improvisation of materials, nicely woven plots and intricate detail.

After 3 years of age, make believe is not entirely as free as it was in earlier stages. Adults who find themselves engaged in imaginative games with a child, at this stage, know that there are restrictions and wrong moves. One might unwittingly sit upon an imaginary companion, unknowingly walk through an invisible wall instead of the door to a pretend house, or be told, 'Daddies don't do the washing up'.

For the child, after 3, there has to be an internal consistency in imaginative games, that highlight the salient features of the child's real world. First there are the rules which govern the transition to make believe. For example, children usually announce what they are going to be, and then adopt a voice and activity that is different from normal behaviour.

Although we know little about the criteria children use to distinguish make believe and reality, children of this age do distinguish between a situation as it actually is and as they have transformed it, (Garvey,1977) and will say things such as, 'Is that your fireman's hat.' 'I'm not the dragon any more. Please don't push me 'cause I'm not the dragon any more,' or 'I'm not playing any more'.

Children of this age often mark the transition to play by asking their partner to pretend, for example, 'You be the Mummy and I'll be the Daddy'. There is a paradox for the child. This 'is' and 'is not' what it seems to be, and allows players to comment in a relatively safe context on their social relationships (Fishbein, 1984).

Imaginative play suspends ordinary rules and consequences, and favours rules and consequences that are less demanding, as seen in mock battles. Often the latter are initiated by younger, weaker or more submissive children, who could reasonably expect to lose or be hurt seriously, if combat were 'for real' (Fein,1978). An initial message is given that this is play, that aggressiveness is feigned, and all players are to have fun and not inflict harm. For example, blows are exaggerated and miss the mark.

Standard Plots, Rules and Roles

Make believe between 3 and 4 years, often takes the form of dramatic play which employs certain standard plots. These revolve around simple domestic scenes and healing, as in administering food or medicine, or a sudden threat, for example a monster to be fled from or defended against. (Garvey, 1977). The episode can end happily, 'I got him', or unhappily, 'He ate me. I'm dead', without prearrangement.

Children who engage in imaginative dramatic play together, have to be able to follow essentially the same rules of the play procedures (Fishbein, 1984). Taking turns is the most basic of these rules ,'It's your turn', or 'It's my turn'. Violation of this rule may lead to the cessation of the drama.

Another important rule is that children must keep a consistent role. If a child is pretending to be a nurse, she must remain so for the entire drama, and not become the patient or the baby. Children correct each other when they shift roles. One must also play one's roles in an appropriately realistic way. Mummies must wear pretty soft hats and not space helmets.

At early ages children can become so absorbed in their imaginative play that they forget it is play, and become genuinely angry when playmates do not play their assigned parts properly. Some become so caught up in their play roles, they want to carry them over into real life. For example, one little girl; who became a postman, rejected her new bike until she learnt that sometimes postman use them.

Children have to be able to simultaneously improvise and maintain the agreed upon imaginative drama and its theme. In view of the fact that children cannot read each others minds, this is an amazing ability, and its not surprising that such games are often of short curation.

The Influence of Reality

Make believe play and drama of all kinds is often firmly grounded in social reality and what has already been learned. Preschool children love to pretend to be animals, objects or other people, or act out domestic and family activities with which they are familiar, for example, taking care of the baby, or visiting the

supermarket or doctor. Children who pretend the 'bogeyman' will eat them up in the dark, may have been taught that it is dangerous to go out at night without an adult caregiver (Gibson, 1978).

The imaginative games of children frequently mirror actual contemporary conflicts (Opie & Opie, 1959 & 1969). For example children in Berlin were observed shooting at each other across miniature walls after that city was divided. After John Kennedy was killed, American children frequently played assassination games. Children in German concentration camps, during World War 11, were observed playing 'going to the gas chamber'.

Learning to Cope

Much of children's fantasy and imagination is directed at imitating and learning about adults. Imaginative games among preschoolers often take the form of 'trying out' the roles of adults, for example, mother or dad. They learn to play the stern and the soft parent, and the different responses involved give practice in how to interact with and influence such differing parents. Children love to imitate adults and, in so doing, learn how it feels to be an important person with special tasks to perform.

Imaginative games also serve preparatory and training functions. For example in hunting cultures, games of physical skill predominate. In primitive societies, which rely on magic or ritual to solve major group problems and punish individual achievement, games of chance are the major form of play. In highly structured societies, based on obedience, diplomacy, class distinction and warfare, children learn games of strategy (Fein, 1978).

There are still important differences in the imaginative games of the sexes. Boys' games are more frequently played outdoors, and are more competitive, involving rules and goals. Girls' games are more co-operative without winners or losers, goals or end points (Fein, 1978). Researchers discussing this, usually emphasise the deficiency model, which is often found in psychology and psychiatry when discussing female behaviour. Certainly girls get less training in their games in physical aggression, confrontation and judicial processes. But, if one wishes to encourage co-operation, this may be advantageous training for both sexes.

There are sex and age differences in the roles assigned in many games. For example, when mixed aged groups of preschoolers are playing sudden threat dramas about monsters, 2 and 3 year olds are usually obliged to be the victims and the 4 and 5 year olds are more usually the defenders. When an older pair of children are of the opposite sex, the boy is more likely to be the defender and the girl an observer or victim.

Improving Social Acceptance

It appears that the ability of children to get along with their peers is related to their ability to indulge in different forms of dramatic pretence. The greater the child's initiative in this activity, the greater the probability of social acceptance among peers (Gibson, 1978). Role play also appears to be imortant in

building self esteem, for it allows children to gain a reflected view of themselves, and an understanding of their differences and similarities to others, and helps them to practise and perfect new behaviours and feel competent (Erikson, 1963). Above all imaginative play provides a time when children can control things themselves.

Individual Differences

Children exhibit differing styles in their imaginative play. Some children, described as patterners, are fascinated with the relations between objects and they begin to classify objects early, attending to sizes and shapes. Children defined as 'dramatists' focus on people and are interested in dramatic play. Thus at 14 months, one child may prefer a game centring on the exchange of small objects, while another prefers peek a boo and interacting with an adult. (Schell & Hall, 1983).

A patterner of this age, who is given a teaset or dolls, finds stacking the plates and nesting the cups more interesting than pretending to drink a cup of tea. At two years years patterners are likely to divide blocks into shapes and sizes, whereas dramatists will pretend a block is a car or a hat.

Although by the time they are three, the patterners develop some of the symbolic, interpersonal skills of the dramatists, and the dramatists begin to classify and sort objects, both continue to approach the world in terms of their preferred style. The latter may be hereditary, or learnt as a result of modelling in the family.

Singer and Singer (1973) have suggested that some children have a stronger predisposition to fantasy than others, and found them to be happier, tending to play more, and able to concentrate on a single task longer and showing more self reliance than others. Singer also found that childrn with vivid imaginations will sit quietly for longer periods, than will children with less imaginative capacity. They'll also wait longer, entertain themselves more, resist temptation more and remember and report details better.

Patience and calm are not the only attributes associated with the ability to fantasise. Those who are best at it are often among the older children in the family, and emotionally close to their parents.

Some cultures and social classes encourage pretend play in children more than others, but in the latter case there are many individual variations. There does seem to be a depressed developmemt in cognitive, social and verbal skills, where it is lacking (Garvey, 1977).

PROMOTING OR INHIBITING FANTASY

Parents

If imaginative play is to flourish and expand after a child is 4 or 5 years old, it seems to require some kind of social nurturance (Singer & Singer, 1977). Unless parents are tolerant of fantasy, imagine along with their children, or provide them with specific opportunities for make believe, their child's fantasy play is likely to decline or even disappear. Interview studies suggest that imaginative young children have mothers and parents who enjoy playing with children, enjoy make believe themselves, and tell their children stories (Freyberg, 1973).

Props and Playmates

Factors such as space, models, and time, appear to be important in preschoolers' imaginative behaviour. If parents supply the props, children will do the pretending and the imagining. Popular and accessible props are: 1. kitchen utensils, 2. dress up materials (hats, dresses, jewellery, shirts, ties etc.), 3. school materials (paper, pencils, blackboard, chalk) and 4. pretend supermarket gear (money, price tags, empty food containers, waxed fruits etc.).

Objects that nurture imaginative play and fantasy change with age. Children of about 2 years of age prefer to play with realistic toys (toy cups, telephones, brooms) and typically use the materials they find around them for imaginative play. They like sand with digging and container toys, such as shovels and pails. Opportunities for water play, doll play, and access to clay and play dough and art materials are good means of encouraging imagination in the early preschool years. At this stage when children's drawings are not representational and largely playful and experiential, they should be permitted to paint for the fun of it, rather than to please others or learn technicalities.

Five year old children, whose make believe capacities are well established, prefer to use relatively unstructured, less realistic objects, in conjunction with imaginative ideas and diverse role playing (Pulaski, 1974). For example, they may use sand as make believe milk from a make believe cow. Open ended environments are more stimulating than restricted use of objects. Thus play materials need to be age specific, and rules for older children should be be flexible enough to permit them to use materials in several different ways. For example parents are often restrictive about educational toys and rigidly specify how they may be used.

Children also need contact with other children, with whom they can practice their symbolic powers, and benefit from positive social interactions, interspersed with quarrells. These interactions create novelty, surprise and challenge (Fein, 1978). They also need other children to engage in group imaginative dramas and make believe games, and so gain experience in the give and take of such playful events.

Children particularly benefit from time together with other children to enact their rhymes, their riddles, their folklore, for not only do these give a sense of belonging to the special

world of childhood, but give opportunity for fun and some sense of control in a stressful adult world.. Children require time for unguided and imaginative exploration. This is sometimes in conflict with a regime of television, video games, computerised learning, the commercialisation of childhood, and parental over organisation.

Excessive Structure and Organisation

Traditional scope for childish imagination may be discouraged by the commercialisation of childhood. For example, today's child, rather than collecting butterflies or sea shells, may be given collections already mounted, collected and labelled. Yesterday's 12 year old used to hammer or rope together a makeshift raft which constantly threatened to disintegrate in mid stream; todays 12 year-old fits together a well-joined skiff, tightly caulked and waterproofed and makes it work.

Middleclass parents tend to try and recapture their own childhood through their children, and treat them to a highly organised schedule of music lessons, dance lessons, riding lessons and going to camps. All these activities, together with school and homework and large doses of T.V., effectively fill the child's day. Some feel that childhood lore transmitted from child to child in previous generations is being drowned in all these activities. Childish imagination and initiative, it is said, is not given sufficient rein to cope with the stresses of contemporary life (Stone & Church, 1979).

The Role of Television

There is some indication that TV may play a helpful role in the development of make believe play in those children, whose parents do not pass on fairy tales, myths and legends to them (Fein, 1978). However, for all children, wherever possible, Singer and Singer (1974) suggest that imaginative TV shows need to be used with carefully structured adult mediation. Where children watch TV in groups, the smaller the better, so that they have the opportunity to express interest, misconceptions, doubts, fears and coercions.

Celluloid promoted fantasies do appear to have certain difficulties for preschoolers and their parents. Since young children's ability to discrimminate between reality and fantasy is shaky, they are often convinced that what they are watching on TV are real events.

Atkin, Reeves and Hocking (1979) found that young children develop a personal bond with fantasy figures in television commercials. They trust Ronald McDonald, Fred Flintstone and Captain Crunch, and believe they tell the truth about their fries, shakes and sugared cereals. Most young children believe that the commercial characters know whether the children eat their products, and nearly half of the 5 to 7 year olds believe their fantasy friends would feel bad, if the young viewers ate competing products.

While television is not an entirely negative force, extensive television viewing by children severely limits the amount of time that they can give to sensory exploration and interaction with people. Their play often reflects what they see on TV rather

than what they can construct out of their own experiences (Phillips, 1986).

Friedman, a psychoanalyst, suggests that regular television viewing has rendered children passive, thus denying them normal outlets for their fantasy and aggression. He argues that it feeds children ready made fantasy at a time when fantasy making is crucial for their development. He also believes that achieving the celluloid presence of others, simply by pushing a button, makes it difficult to establish genuine real life relationships. Thus T V should be available for children in small doses only (Fein, 1978).

Training For Imagination and Fantasy

It appears, where children are unimaginative, due to lack of models and encouragement, that training and practice in make believe has its effect, especially where group activity and communication, originality and creativity are emphasised (Garvey, 1977). Freyberg (1973), working with some disadvantaged children in New York, who on the whole were not fantasisers, by merely using such props as pipe cleaners and blocks, and acting stories and adventures, found that the children quickly took the initiative and invented their own plots.

Unimaginative children, who receive special training in acting out fantasy stories, such as the Billy Goats Gruff or Little Red Riding Hood, are better able to construct new stories from picture sequences, and to recognise causal relations between one event and another (Saltz & Johnson, 1974).

MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

The Waning of Imagination and Fantasy

By middle childhood, children rarely engage in spontaneous and complex imaginative dramas. Instead their interest shifts to games, both formal and informal. There has been little research directed at discovering the reasons for this overt decline in imagination and fantasy. Perhaps by 8 or 9 years children learn that pretending is just pretending, and become concerned with learning about the real world.

Some believe that imagination and dramatic play may disappear as overt behaviour, but that it persists in the daydreams and fantasies of later life (Singer, 1973). Perhaps pretending goes underground because the conflict between reality and fantasy cannot be expressed in the rule oriented games of later childhood, or interest may be suppressed, because western culture tends to discourage what it regards as non utilitarian thought. Parents and teachers without realising it, may signal their disapproval of fantasy in the primary school years (Pulaski, 1974; Schell & Hall, 1983).

Of course the child's capacity for fantasy in later school years may exceed the possibility of acting it out. Alternatively, reading, thinking, or watching TV may become the dominant way of dealing with fantasy in middle childhood.

LIES

Lying is often seen as deliberately immoral behaviour in children, yet it has much to do with the child's stage of cognitive development and incomprehension of adult language and expectations.

In toddlerhood and the early preschool years, 'moral' behaviour depends on conditioning and imitation. Very young children are taught what is 'right and 'wrong' through demonstration and reward for physical activities and imitation, but do not always understand the purpose of the coercions placed upon them. In preschool years they learn that to be obedient is good. They still do not always comprehend why they must behave in such and such a fashion, other than it is naughtynot to do so.

During later childhood, an important transition occurs from this early morality of blind obedience, to the possession of an internalised conscience which guides the child's ethical behaviour, without the need for supervision, policing and threats of punishment. It is believed that parents, who through the early years, patiently explain the effect of the child's behaviour on others, without overburdening them with guilt, and give reasons for rules and taboos, play an important role in encouraging self reliant morality.

Also important is cognitive maturation, and the development of abstract thought which begins to develop in the late primary school years. This enables children to understand the logic behind moral rules, and to interpret the perspective of another. Equally important is play with peers and learning to understand the viewpoint of others.

In the early years fantasies and wish fulfillments should not be confused with lying. In fact it seems that children do not fully understand the nature of lies until the end of primary school. When Piaget asked a group of children, aged 6 to 12, what it meant to tell a lie, he found that almost all children under the age of 9 defined lies as anything one could get into trouble for saying (1965). One six year old described a lie as 'when you say a naughty word', meaning a four letter word.

Most children who defined lies in this way, also believed that untruths which did not receive disapproval were not lies, or at least were not very naughty ones. It was considered more acceptable to lie to another child than to an adult, because children were more credulous and less able to administer punishment. Lies to adults were sometimes condoned, if the liar was clever enough not to be found out. Piaget asked children to judge which of two boys were naughtiest - one who, after being frightened, romanced that he had seen a dog as big as a cow, or one who told his mother that he'd received good marks, when he had not. Most children, under the age of 9, believed the first child was naughtiest, because his mother would know immediately that what he said was untrue.

Young children consider many verbal mistakes, such as slips of the tongue, or inadvertently giving wrong, but well meaning directions, to be lies. In the latter case, if the person, so misdirected loses his way, young children regard the person, responsible for the directions as considerably more deceitful,

than one who deliberately but unsucessfully misdirects a stranger as a joke. Even guesses were seen as lies if they were later proved incorrect, for example an incorrect guess at someone's age.

A recent study in Australia confirmed the tendency of young children to identify as lies any statements which were later proved to be factually inaccurate. The children were shown films depicting children who incorrectly guessed an adults age, and uttered swear words, or who exaggerated by claiming to have seen a chicken as big as an elephant, or made an innocent mistake while giving street directions (Petersen, Peterson & Seeto, 1983). The results confirmed Piaget's suggestion that most young children do not understand the difference between a lie and a genuine mistake.

Older children hold different beliefs about lying (Piaget, 1965). Guesses are now not seen as lies. Deliberate deceptions are considered as lies in proportion to the likelihood that the hearer will believe them. Older children also think it worse to lie to a peer than an adult, because the peer is more credulous. Piaget believes that children learn to understand the nature of lies better from peers than from adults. He suggests that one of the best lessons in why dishonesty is wrong comes when children experience the natural consequences of deception, for example a loss of other people's trust.

Apart from cognitive immaturity, emotional factors play a part in so called lying in children. For example fear is often the root cause of children's lying. They may be afraid of the consequences, or afraid of the rousing they might receive, whether real or imagined, because adults threaten children with things they do not intend to carry out as a means of control. For example how often does one hear these kinds of statements :

'Mummy and Daddy won't love you any more if you pull the pussy's tail.

'If you touch anything in the supermarket I'll cut your hands off.'

Children believe these threats and imagine frightening consequences. Confusions about what authorities will prohibit and why, and fear of authority are fairly general among children. Young children may happily mix all the creams on mother's dressing table in the way they do play dough of various colours, and feel bewildered at the punishment or fuss that follows. They may be sad or upset at the anger they have aroused, and deny what they have done, to stem the anger, disapproval or threatened loss of love.

Its best to tell children what the consequences are going to be and make sure that they are something with which they can cope, for example, helping to clear up the mess, docking pocket money or helping with chores for a certain period of time.

Other forms of so called lying in children may be due to their inability to understand cause and effect and their misinterpretation of language. This is discussed in Selected Paper No 30 (Phillips, 1983).

IMAGINARY COMPANIONS

In the past there has been considerable debate as to whether imaginary playmates are a healthy sign in children. Some professionals, parents and theorists believe that imaginary companions have a harmful effect on a child, and that they are evidence of insecurity, withdrawal, latent neurosis and a poor substitute for real companions (Fraiberg, 1971). Only a generation ago, children who reported having imaginary playmates were thought crazy and parents often tried to cure them, thereby probably forcing children to keep their companions secret. Most of these attitudes appear to be a product of untested folkore or misguided interpretation of theory.

As indicated earlier, many of the Freudian school see fantasy as a means of coping with anxiety. Similarly many members of this school see imaginary companions as the child's attempt to satisfy wishes, resolve conflicts and reduce anxiety, when these ends cannot be attained by realistic measures. For example, Bruno Bettelheim sees imaginary playmates as a sympton of some problem, such as loneliness, and believes the intensity and purpose of the companion should be diagnosed.

Jean Piaget, however, regards children' games with imaginary companions as a form of symbolic play, and a normal cognitive process. Most contemporary researchers support some variation on this theme, and suggest that preschoolers with vivid imaginations have imaginary companions, and are neither liars nor disturbed. They are simply showing a normal characteristic of preschool thinking. In fact they may be better adjusted than children who do not have such vivid fantasies (Pines, 1978).

Singer (1973) also believes they are a healthy sign in children and a way of working for good mental health, except where a child abandons the real world perpetually for imaginary people, and cannot establish meaningful relationships with real people. This is unhealthy, as opposed to children who employ their imagination to solve problems or to have fun. In fact psychotic children appear not to have imaginary companions (Nagera, 1969).

Nagera reviews studies which indicate that there are no significant differences between children who have imaginary companions and those who do not, in respect of behaviour problems, whether parents were married or divorced, characteristics such as shyness or outgoingness, numbers of brothers and sisters, relationships with playmates or time spent with parents.

Generally the research suggests that the phenomenon of imaginary companions is common to a large proportion of preschoolers, and occurs most frequently in children between the ages of 2 1/2 and 3 years, and to a lesser extent around 9 1/2 and 10 years (Nagera, 1969, Manosevitz et al, 1973 & Singer, 1973). Such studies also indicate that the children who have imaginary companions become more engrossed in their play activities.

They are also inclined to be less aggressive and more co-operative, happier, show greater ability to concentrate, are seldom bored and their language is richer and more advanced, than children without imaginary companions (Singer, 1973). They watch far less television and their choice of programmes is quite

different; they tend not to be interested in cartoons and violent shows which are preferred by children who do not have imaginary playmates.

Characteristics of Imaginary Playmates

On the whole male children appear to prefer male imaginary playmates (Manosevitz et al, 1973). Females show a lesser tendency to have companions of the same sex, which perhaps reflects the early influence of the sexual hierarchy in western culture, or the lesser flexibility of male preschoolers. Girls give more definite descriptions of their imaginary companions than boys.

Most children have only one imaginary playmate but a small percentage have two. Often the imaginary playmate's age is not important, and to a lesser extent they are the same age as the child and even less are older. Names are mostly common ones, coming from names of friends, television, books or relatives (Manosevitz et al, 1973). Some are elves, fairies, animals, dolls and other objects; many go through a variety of metamorphoses in accordance with the child's wishes.

Nowadays, where most parents are quite willing to accept imaginary playmates, they can play an active part in the child's family life. Imaginary companions are often given all the vividness and solidity of real people, and the family may find themselves obliged to make continual adjustments, such as taking care not to sit on the companion and setting an extra place at the table.

Functions of Imaginary Playmates

A large percentage of parents describe imaginary companions as being good for their children (Manosevitz et al, 1973).

Some serve as <u>scapegoats</u> for unacceptable impulses. The imaginary companion can be dirty, selfish, noisy and allow the child to remain the picture of perfection. The imaginary playmate may take the blame for the naughty things children do.

This scapegoat function is not pure, for it contains the beginning of the child's own <u>self criticism</u> and emerging conscience. As explained earlier in this paper, moral cosciousness is not strongly developed until late primary school, when children's abstract cognitive abilities are emerging. Thus the imaginary companion represents an intermediate step for children, between external control by parents and teachers, and the child's own internalised conscience. Children learn to control their behaviour through their imaginary companions; 'Little Annie must go to the potty and not make smells'. 'Davie is naughty. He took some bikkies from the tin while his mum was on the telephone'. In older children, the imaginary companion may reinforce the child's emerging awareness of others; 'It hurt Susy when Mary told that fib about her cat'.

Some imaginary companions fill empty spaces and provide <u>support</u> when the child feels lonely, neglected or rejected, or has to cope with stressful situations or loss. Such situations include a death, the birth of a new baby or the departure of someone important to the child. Such imaginary companions usually

disappear when the child has adjusted or found new friends (Nagera,1969).

Imaginary companions corroborate stories; they share accounts of how unfair the world is; they give unfailing support (Pines, 1978).

The imaginary companion also makes it possible to express hidden, unconscious or unmanageable feelings. Said one 3 year old, who was very nervous about attending a new kindergarten, and had an imaginary playmate called Davie, "There's a lion down the street so Davie can't go to kindy any more. He's afraid of the lion. He's a baby. I'm not. I'm big.' Another 3 year old, whose father had departed to live with a new wife, said sadly of her imaginary companion, Millie, 'Millie's crying 'cos her Daddy left and doesnt come home any more. She's only little. I don't cry'.

Eventually imaginary companions disappear or fade away; some die a dramatic death in a plane crash or are eaten by dragons.

CONCLUSION

'Although make believe play shows some promising potential as a therapeutic tool, it is first and foremost a normal and essential part of growing up. It is closely linked to the development of communicative skills, patience, concentration, attention span and imagination' (Fein, 1978, p 286).

It also appears to contribute to the development of creativity and the flexibility, with which children learn to approach real life situations and tasks. The ability to fantasise may also make it easier for children to adapt to new approaches or ideas, and be inventive with diverse materials (Pulaski,1974). Inadvertent, discouraging messages from parents, teachers or grandparents may inhibit this potential. Imagination and fantasy needs to be seen to be valued by those important to children, otherwise they may learn to doubt, fear or reject this essential part of themselves.

Parents sometimes worry that their children spend too much time in imaginative play, and not enough with other children or in more serious activities (Fein, 1978). Yet imagination and fantasy is an essential part of development. A child needs a long period of make believe play to strengthen spontaneity and expression (Caplan, 1974). Fantasy helps children's sense of self esteem and competency, gives them some escape from parental authority, and aids in the reduction of anxiety. Children need time to be alone or play with others as they please to develop and utilise their fantasy and imagination for their own good mental health.

Based on a seminar given at Newcastle University, April, 1986.

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